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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 001277

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR G/TIP, DRL, NEA/RA, NEA/ARPI
STATE PASS USTR (AROSENBERG)
USDOL FOR B. CLATANOFF
US MISSION GENEVA FOR N. KYLOH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM ELAB KOCI SCUL ETRD PREL MU

SUBJECT: ILO, UNICEF KUDOS FOR OMANI CAMEL RACING REFORM

REF: MUSCAT 1237 AND PREVIOUS

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The regional directors for UNICEF and the ILO met on August 14 with Sports Minister Ali al-Sunaidi to discuss Omani camel racing reforms. The government is not only gradually raising jockey age limits from 14 to 18 years, but is also setting minimum age standards for camels because mature animals are capable of bearing heavier jockeys. The UNICEF and ILO representatives said they are impressed by Oman's reform. The ILO representative considers camel racing in Oman to be in compliance with ILO Convention 182. End summary.

Holistic Approach to Reform

¶2. (SBU) UNICEF's Muscat-based regional representative June Kunugi briefed P/E Chief on August 15 on discussions she had the previous day with visiting ILO Middle East Director Talib Rifai and Minister of Sport Ali al-Sunaidi. Kunugi said the Minister was deeply engaged and highly conversant regarding his ministry's efforts to reform the sport. Al-Sunaidi told the visitors of a top-down review that was intended to address all aspects of the need to improve conditions for jockeys. The minister explained that bedouin families depend on the income derived from breeding and selling camels. To lower the costs of raising them, the owners had an economic incentive to exploit them at the youngest possible age. But, by racing adolescent camels, the owners also had to use the lightest possible jockeys, such as bedouin children.

¶3. (SBU) When the Ministry established the minimum jockey age for the coming racing season at 14 (raised annually by one year until reaching the mandated minimum age of 18 by 2009), the Ministry also had to establish a minimum age for camels, as well as regulate the maximum race distance per camel age group, and set the maximum allowable weight on camels at 52 kg. The Ministry will also roll out a public awareness campaign as the racing season approaches, focusing less on owners and camels and more on jockeys.

Selling it to the Breeders

¶4. (SBU) Kunugi told P/E Chief that breeders have strongly criticized al-Sunaidi for the reforms, because caring and feeding camels for additional years before they can race cuts substantially into their profits. The Ministry's rejoinder, she explained, has been to point out that racing immature camels is harmful to them, and injuries also cut deeply into breeders' profits. Moreover, the government announced a \$2.6 million gift from the Sultan to "support the sport," which Kunugi said is essentially a subsidy to the camel breeders to offset the losses from the new reforms. Breeders feared that the government sought to kill the sport under "foreign pressure," but the Sultan's gift helped the Ministry reassure the bedouin that the reforms will help preserve this vital element of Omani traditional culture. Of all the Gulf states raising jockey age limits, Kunugi said Oman was the only one of which she is aware that had the foresight to offer this supplement.

ILO Convention 182-Compliant

¶5. (SBU) According to Kunugi, ILO Regional Director Rifai and she are pleased with Oman's progress toward establishing the 18-year age limit. She said ILO Convention 182 deems camel racing a hazardous endeavor, and 18 should therefore be the minimum age for jockeys. Given the fact that Oman is moving toward that standard, Kunugi said that Rifai considers Oman

in compliance with Convention 182.

No Foreign Jockeys, But...

¶6. (SBU) Kunugi reiterated her certainty that, unlike some other Gulf neighbors, camel racing in Oman does not involve foreign jockeys. That said, she noted that UAE authorities recently sent six Omani jockeys back to the Sultanate. She added that they did not appear to have been abused, as sometimes occurred with other foreign jockeys.

BALTIMORE